

## Willox the Wizard

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN recent articles I have described the three main types of water-horse story — ‘Water-Horse and Woman’, ‘Water-Horse and Children’, ‘Water-Horse and Farmer’. And I have drawn attention to the magic bridle which is a distinctive feature of ‘Water-Horse and Farmer’.

Now only rarely is that bridle omitted from ‘Water-Horse and Farmer’. In one telling the farmer controls the creature not by a bridle but by means of a bucket of water emptied over its neck. Another example is the account of a water-horse put to work by a certain John MacInnes in Glenelg. Every night, according to one version, when he stables it he spreads some earth from a mole’s hill over it as a charm. According to another, he merely blesses it. According to a third (told by the late Rev. Tom Murchison from Kylerhea in volume 39-40 of the Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness), he simply takes good care to unyoke the horse before sunset, but one day, in his anxiety to finish a particular field, he carries on ploughing as the sun goes down. “No sooner had the sun disappeared underneath the horizon than the strange horse freed itself from the harness, seized poor John in its mouth, and plunged with him into the loch.”

The absence of the magic bridle highlights the water-horse’s essential ‘Jekyll and Hyde’ character. This apparently Freudian aspect of the construct is to the fore in ‘Water-Horse and Woman’ as summarised by Margaret Fay Shaw in her book ‘Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist’. “The *each-uisge*, as he is called, becomes a handsome young man at night and he comes about the house to court pretty girls. At daylight he changes into a savage horse that drags his victim into the loch.” It’s curious that in ‘Water-Horse and Farmer’ the dark side is manifest at night, while in ‘Water-Horse and Woman’ the dark side is manifest during the day.

A comparison between Irish and Nordic variants of ‘Water-Horse and Farmer’ reveals a subtle difference, however. Writing in the Irish journal ‘Béalóideas’ in 1991, Professor Bo Almqvist pointed out that in Ireland the reason why the water-horse escapes after nightfall is that he resents being forced to work too long and not being able to enjoy a well-deserved rest after a long day’s toil. But in Scandinavia, says Almqvist, he is connected with the Devil or other dark forces, and his strength increases as the sunlight diminishes. The amiable Celtic Jekyll has become the diabolical Nordic Hyde!

In that respect Scotland goes with Ireland. With respect to the bridle, Scotland goes rather with Scandinavia, where, says Almqvist, ‘the horse is able to go back to the water as soon as the iron bridle, which, on capture, has been put in its mouth, is removed’, except that with us the water-horse has normally come out of the water wearing the bridle in the first place, and it is the *removal* of the bridle at night that controls the horse. Almqvist adds that the bridle is far less prominent in Ireland than in Nordic tradition.

All in all the conclusion I feel drawn to is that the water-horse’s bridle is a quintessentially Scottish motif. Maybe I could go further and point to the fact that a search for stories about the water-horse’s bridle seems to draw you principally to the central and eastern Highlands and their Lowland fringe. The Lochaber bridle which I wrote about last time was said to have come from Rannoch. These are precisely the areas to which we would look for the preservation of elements of Pictish mythology as modified by Gaelic language and tradition; the ‘kelpie’ of the Lowlands may represent similar elements further modified by the languages and traditions of the North Sea littoral, that is, Anglian, Norman, Flemish and Norse.

The water-horse’s, or rather kelpie’s, bridle as known to Lowland Scots tradition is described by J M McPherson in his book ‘Primitive Beliefs in the North-East of Scotland’ of 1929. It is, he says, a ‘waith horse’ bridle, ‘a halter with the cross cut on the cheeks of it’. No-one appears to have made better use of such an object than Gregor Willox or Macgrigor, ‘Willox the Wizard’ (175?-1833), who lived at Gaulrig in Glen Avon, in the parish of Kirkmichael in Highland Banffshire. A whole body of literature grew up around him, with the arguably fortunate result that we possess a detailed word-picture and a rather less detailed line drawing of the object. And there is now an entire book devoted to Willox, Richard E McGregor’s ‘Gregor Willox the Warlock’, published in 1994 by the Aberdeen and N. E. Scotland Family History Society (164 King St., Aberdeen AB2 3BD, phone 01224 646323).

Sir Thomas Dick Lauder visited Willox in extreme old age. Willox showed him the bridle, and in his ‘Tales of the Highlands’ Lauder described it like this: “The water-kelpie’s bridle consists of a flat piece of brass, annular in the middle, and having two lobe-like branches spinning from it in two curves outwards, the wider part of each lobe being slightly recurved inwards, so that they present the appearance of two leaves when they are held flat.

“Attached to the ring part, but loose upon it, are two long doubled pieces of flat brass, and, between these, a short leathern thong is attached by a fastening so intricate that it might have rivalled the Gordian Knot. It has not the most distant resemblance to any part of a bridle, and none of us could guess to what purpose, either useful or ornamental, it could have ever been applied.”

Willox was no slouch at tale-telling. W Grant Stewart, a local man, understood that the bridle was a bit, and that Willox’s ancestor James Macgrigor had cut it with his sword from a water-horse that lived in Loch Ness, but which he encountered in the solitary pass still well known to today’s road and rail travellers as the Slochd. (The name — *an Sloc*, ‘the Pit’ — is of course a Gaelic byword for Hell.) By contrast, Willox allegedly told Lauder that his grand-uncle Macgregor had cut the bridle with his *sgian dubh* from a black water-horse that emerged from Lochindorb.

The latter story was retold by Alexander Polson in ‘Our Highland Folklore Heritage’ of 1926 giving the hero’s name as John Macdonald; this is not entirely unreasonable, as the ‘Elgin Courant’ apparently reported in 1829 that the bridle had actually belonged to a witch who lived in the neighbourhood of that town, and was lost by her in dramatic circumstances in January 1768. “The Magic Bridle was carried down the Lossie. How it was recovered, and afterwards got into the hands of Mr Willox is . . . more than we have been able to learn.”

Judging from the same report, it would appear that the confidence placed in the bridle's powers at that time can scarcely be over-emphasised. "So great was the virtue supposed to reside in this Bridle," continued the 'Courant' correspondent, "that the peasantry of the North of Scotland would . . . have travelled . . . a distance of forty-five, or even sixty miles to Mr Willox . . . that they might obtain the benefit of it. The lower classes in the counties of Inverness, Nairn, Elgin and Banff, most potently believed in the efficacy of the Bridle in almost every case of indisposition."

Even in his old age there was no doubting Willox's reputation, as the philologist Alexander Macbain (1855-1907), brought up in Badenoch, confirmed. "It was by means of a water-kelpie's bridle that the ever famous Willox of Strathavon could tell the anxious inquirer who among his neighbours had thieved his goods or charmed away the milk of his cows," he told the Gaelic Society of Inverness in 1888. "Till within comparatively late years the family representative was the grand oracle of the north in such matters."

Willox's usual method was to shake the bridle over some water, or to drop a white charm-stone through it into the water, along with an incantation or two; he would then bottle the water and sell it. He also gave advice on stolen property, seemingly by looking through the bridle or observing reflections in the bridle-water.

Richard McGregor's book is full of detailed descriptions of how Willox earned his living like this, so here is just one, from the 'Courant' of 1856. A man's wife is sick, so his mother-in-law persuades him to go and see Willox. "When we told him our errand, he immediately filled a basin of clear spring water, and bringing out of some hiding-place a white stone and a bridle, said to be that of a water-horse or kelpie, he dropped the stone through the bridle into the water several times, muttering some spells in a low voice all the while.

"He then looked intently at the water through the bridle for a considerable time, when he seemed to be satisfied, and he told my friend that his wife was certainly bewitched, but that if he followed his directions, she would certainly recover. He then filled a common bottle with the water in the basin, for which he charged 5s 3d."

What happened to the bridle? According to McGregor, Willox had a daughter Betty who was not married but had three children by James Cameron in Gaulrig. John Cameron, the eldest son, was known to have had the bridle, and McGregor quotes the 'Courant' of 17 October 1952: "The magic bridle came to the warlock's niece Mary Willon [sic], from her, they say, to one V— C— and I understand a family on Speyside has it now."

The Camerons were said to have moved to Tomintoul, but McGregor believes the reference to Speyside may be correct, and if anyone reads this who has any knowledge of the object I would be delighted to hear from them.

But then, as a supernatural relic, maybe more than one person has it. McGregor also quotes this from the 'Northern Scot' of 22 January 1921, in an article about a collection of curios owned by James Muil, a retired farmer, of Southfield, Garmouth: "Another curious exhibit is reputed to be a bridle taken from a water-kelpie by Willox the Wizard near Sourden, Orton. Ahem!"

**WHFP 10 September 1999**